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## Flight to America: the Social Background of 300,000 Danish Emigrants/Schools for Life: the Grundtvigian Folk Schools in America

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## Book Reviews

Michael D. Gibson, Book Review Editor

### **From Denmark to America: A Review Essay**

*Flight to America: The Social Background of 300,000 Danish Emigrants*, by Kristian Hvidt. New York: Academic Press, 1975, pp. viii, 214. \$13.50.

*Schools for Life: The Grundtvigian Folk Schools in America*, by Enok Mortensen. Solvang, California: Danish-American Heritage Society, 1977, pp. 143. \$5.00.

In recent decades, research on Danish emigration and the history of Danes following their arrival in the United States has lagged behind the quantity and quality of work being done on both sides of the Atlantic on the experiences of the Danes' Nordic neighbors. There has been no Danish equivalent of the highly successful Uppsala project, *Sverige och America* (Sweden and America), or of the type of migration studies currently being done at *Turun Yliopisto* in Turku, Finland. Nor has there been any Danish-American organization that comes close to matching the scholarly achievements of the Norwegian-American Historical Association and the Swedish Pioneer Historical Society. Without question, then, the publication of the two exceptionally fine books reviewed here are events of major importance in Danish and Danish-American historiography. And because more Danes—roughly one in ten—came to Iowa than to any other state, both books will be of interest to a great many Iowans.

In what amounts to a giant step forward in Scandinavian emigration studies, Kristian Hvidt, currently Head Librarian at the Danish Parliamentary Library, offers a work that is invaluable not only for understanding the patterns of Danish emigration but also as a model for

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testing emigration hypotheses in many other countries. I know of no other book which goes into this question with such depth of research and insight. Hvidt's book is the outgrowth of the fortuitous discovery of fifty-eight handwritten volumes containing personal data on the more than 300,000 Danes who left their homeland in the half century following 1868. From this veritable treasure of information, the author was able to create a computer-assisted profile (year and month of departure; sex; traveling alone or in a group; occupation; age; place of last residence; destination) of approximately 172,000 Danes who departed between 1868 and 1900, about ninety percent of the total emigration for that period. Seldom allowing the reader to forget that each piece of quantitative datum represents a person, Hvidt skillfully interprets the data, frequently pausing to contrast Danish migration with that of other countries, especially Sweden and Norway.

The picture that emerges from the mass of statistics is one of a restless, often dissatisfied, expanding population. In much of rural Denmark, a gradually growing realization that there were possibilities of a better life outside the village or the social circumstances of one's birth began to affect the population after 1850. This ambition for better living conditions—what Hvidt calls "social buoyancy"—was soon being expressed in increased migrations—both internal and external. Many Danes, whose unsatisfied ambitions had caused them to leave home, traveled only to the nearest provincial town where the growth of industry was creating a demand for workers. The fact that industrialism came relatively early to Denmark and that its towns and cities were less scattered than those of Norway and Sweden helps to explain, Hvidt believes, why Danish emigration never reached the magnitude of its neighbors. But industrial development was frequently too slow to absorb all the newcomers and thus many Danes were eventually forced to move again—often, this time, choosing the United States as their next domicile.

For those who wished to remain in agriculture, Hvidt uncovers equally clear migration patterns. Reclamation of moorlands in Jutland provided opportunities for much of western Denmark's surplus rural population until the mid-1880s; thus Danes who emigrated to the United States directly from a rural environment before then tended to come from eastern parts of the country—Bornholm, Langeland, southern Zealand, and Lolland-Falster—and were likely to settle in Michigan or Wisconsin. With the completion of the reclamation projects, overseas migration from Jutland increased sharply, becoming dominant after 1885. Because this later emigration coincided with the settlement of western Iowa and eastern Nebraska, it was the sturdy Jute

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who made up more than half of Iowa's sizable Danish population by 1910.

Hvidt finds many factors, of course, which account for Danish emigration. For example, Denmark was one of the few countries where authorities did not interfere with Mormon missionaries who frequently arranged passage for their converts to the Mormon mecca of "Zion" in the valley of the Great Salt Lake. Young men in North Schleswig, chafing under German occupation and fearing conscription into the Kaiser's army, were likely candidates for emigration. Increased personal contacts across the Atlantic were important, too, as were improvements in transportation. "American letters," often containing money or prepaid tickets, were powerful lures for many Danes. Even so, Hvidt argues that economic motives were primary and that most emigrants fall into two large groups. "One numerically the smaller, but, in relation to the population distribution, the larger, was the urban emigration of people who were caught in the delay of industrialization, who therefore moved on to overseas countries. The other group was the part of the rural population possessing the same buoyancy as those who migrated to the towns, but who preferred to stay in an agrarian milieu. They ended up as farmers on the American prairie" (pp. 200-201). About seventy-five percent of Iowa's Danes came from the second group.

Once in the new world, some Danes set out to recreate the folk school, one of their homeland's cherished institutions. The Danish folk school had been born in the midst of a crisis of national spirit which followed Denmark's disastrous alliance with France during the Napoleonic wars. Its father was the celebrated theologian and reformer, N. F. S. Grundtvig, who sought some means of rousing his countrymen from their state of despair. Grundtvig advocated a school for young adults—compulsory education ended at age fourteen—where the emphasis was not on memory work or preparation for stringent examinations, but rather one which was "alert to the demands of life and which takes life as it really is." There would be no entrance tests, final examinations or diplomas, just a congenial atmosphere where young people gathered to learn about diverse cultural, social, and economic issues. There was a strong strain of nationalism in the folk school, as Grundtvig and other leaders of the movement sought to enhance their students' love of country and language. It was almost inevitable, therefore, that Danish immigrants in the United States, seeking to perpetuate their heritage, turned to the folk school as a pattern for their first educational institutions.

Although scholars have long recognized the unique contribution to

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adult education in Northern Europe made by the Danish folk school and have written extensively about it, few have studied the efforts to transplant the concept to American soil. Fortunately, in the person of Enok Mortensen, this Danish-American educational experiment has finally found its historian. Correctly described by Hvidt as "the most eminent authority now living in the field of Danish-American history," Mortensen's association with the folk schools began in 1921, shortly after his arrival in the United States as a sixteen-year-old immigrant from Denmark. After briefly recounting the origins of the folk school movement in Denmark, Mortensen turns to the American setting. He devotes a chapter to each of the six schools established in North America by Danish immigrants, beginning with the one at Elk Horn, Iowa, which was started in 1878 in the midst of the largest Danish settlement in the United States. Similar schools soon followed: Ashland, Michigan in 1882; Nysted, Nebraska in 1887; Danebod at Tyler, Minnesota in 1888; Atterdag at Solvang, California in 1911; and Dalum in Alberta, Canada in 1921. Because most of the schools were proprietary, they often took on the character of their founder or current owner. Yet Mortensen finds a surprising degree of similarity. Teachers and school leaders appear first at one school, then at a second or third (Mortensen, himself, taught at three of the six), sharing with each other a total dedication to the cause. In the long run, however, unflagging zeal could not overcome the problems of too few students—probably no more than 12,000 in combined attendance—and not enough money. By the time of World War I and its "Americanization" campaigns, the "golden age" of the Danish American folk school had passed. Nysted, Danebod, Atterdag, and Dalum struggled on into the 1930s, but the depression forced them to finally close their doors.

Why did the Danish folk school concept fail to take root in America? There are many reasons, but Mortensen believes that the basic one lies in the fact that the environment in which the schools were planted eventually changed. "As long as the Danish communities were more or less isolated islands of culture," he writes, "the folk school flourished, but when the process of assimilation had leveled all, or most, boundaries, the folk school was forced to face prevailing conditions," and it simply was unable to compete with American schools which provided students with more traditional academic or vocational training. (p. 132) Mortensen is not willing to dismiss these Danish-American experiments in adult education as total failures; the schools were important for many students, the author concludes, "whose intellects were sharpened, whose curiosity for learning was stimulated, and whose hearts were warmed and challenged to nobler achievements." (p. 135)

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The recently formed Danish American Heritage Society deserves hearty thanks for assisting Mortensen in the publication of his book. The same organization is currently working closely with Grand View College in Des Moines on a project called the Danish Immigrant Archival Listing, a nation-wide effort to identify and list all resource materials dealing with Danish immigrants. Hopefully this project will further stimulate research and publication in the areas of Danish emigration and the process of assimilation of this ethnic group into an ever changing American society. Hopefully, too, the example of commendable scholarship, intelligent use of sources, and good writing found in *Flight to America* and *Schools for Life* will be an inspiration and guide for students of Danish American history in the years ahead.

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*The Northern Journals of Stephen H. Long: The Journals of 1817 and 1823 and Related Documents*, edited by Lucile M. Kane, June D. Holmquist, and Carolyn Gilman. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1978. pp. xii, 407. \$17.50.

Between 1816 and 1823 Major Stephen Long, of the United States Topographical Engineers, served as America's foremost explorer. During those years he led soldiers and civilian scientists through the Mississippi, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, Red and Arkansas river valleys as well as across the central and southern plains. His companions included some of the most active scientists and scholars of that day, and they gathered much information about the Indians, geology, plant and animal life, and resources of those regions through which they passed. As part of his explorations, Long twice led expeditions up the Mississippi River through Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. In 1817 his party explored parts of all three states in a minimal fashion, but the 1823 expedition proved to be one of the most ambitious efforts to gather scientific data in the upper Mississippi Valley to that time.

The editors, Ms. Kane, Holmquist, and Gilman, are all on the staff of the Minnesota Historical Society where the project has been underway for some years. With financial assistance from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, they gathered Stephen Long's 1817 journal, as well as journals kept in 1823 by Long and James E. Colhoun. In addition they collected copies of other signifi-

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